

Telehealth in Rural Utah

Program Objective:

The Utah Telehealth Network (UTN) seeks to reduce the health care divide by creating an open electronic "virtual" network linking rural health care facilities, health departments and community health centers with larger rural and urban health care facilities.

In FY 2001, the Utah Telehealth Commission (UTC) was authorized under HB 72. The UTC will document telehealth activities and accomplishments, develop a strategic plan, and publish a report for presentation at the 2002 Legislative General Session. Additionally, the UTC is the entity responsible for evaluating and making recommendations on state policy and budget proposals dealing with telehealth by the 2002 Legislative General Session. The Bureau of Primary Care, Rural, and Ethnic Health provides staff to the Commission.

Short Description and Background:

Currently, the Utah Telehealth Network provides interactive video capabilities to three rural health care facilities, and data connectivity to five sites, from the hub at the University of Utah Health Sciences Center. The hub also links UTN video sites with Information Technology Service video sites and out-of-network sites such as Shriners Hospital for Children - Intermountain. By linking health care entities throughout the State, UTN seeks to improve access to health care services for patients of all ages in rural Utah, and reduce isolation and foster retention of health care practitioners in rural Utah. UTN will continue to promote an open network into which all Utah health care providers may connect. Lastly, UTN and the State of Utah Information Technology Services are working closely to advance rural telehealth.

Program Accomplishments:

The Utah Telehealth Network has been developed over the last five years. At the request of Governor Leavitt, the 1995 Utah Legislature approved \$200,000 one-time funding to support a pilot project for telemedicine. At the same time, the University of Utah Health Sciences Center established the Telemedicine Outreach Program developed to link the University of Utah with its clinic on the Nevada border. Subsequently, the Bureau of Primary Care, Rural, and Ethnic Health, Utah Department of Health, contracted with the Telemedicine Outreach Program to implement the pilot project, which utilized existing hub infrastructure at the University of Utah. Additional one-time funding (FY 97 \$150,000, FY 98-FY 00 \$100,000) awarded by the Legislature was used to further the development of UTN. While no funding was provided in FY 01, the Legislature provided funding in FY 02 for telehealth network and telehealth pharmacy support (\$435,000), and a telepharmacy project (\$100,000). The Bureau of Primary Care, Rural, and Ethnic Health is administering the contract for both programs.

Fiscal Implications:

UTN relies on Federal and State funds for operation. During FY 01, when no State funds were available, the Program stagnated. A loss of State funding would impair all aspects of the Program, including the continuing development of the new telepharmacy project (funded this year through HB 89). Additionally, UTN's Federal grant, through the Office for the Advancement of Telehealth is limited to three years. There are two years remaining for this grant.



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